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# Timor-Leste's Foreign Policy: Securing State Identity in the Post-Independence Period

Selver B. Sahin

**Abstract:** This paper examines some of the major ideational aspects of Timor-Leste's foreign policy orientation in the post-independence period. Drawing upon the constructivist accounts of state behaviour, the paper situates Timorese leaders' foreign policy decisions in the broader context of their search to position the fledgling nation in the global political order. It argues that Timor-Leste's insecure state identity has shaped its leaders' foreign policy preferences in the post-independence period. This identity can be examined by separating it into two parts: the construction of spatial boundaries and the creation of a temporal "other". The former is evidenced by the leadership's rhetorical emphasis on the country's Portuguese heritage and their prioritisation of ASEAN membership, both of which are closely related to the consolidation of the young nation's political and cultural identity. The creation of a temporal other, as illustrated by the rise of political discourse emphasising sovereignty, reflects a wider transitional process that is embedded in the country's transformation from colony to independent state under international supervision as well as the state's transformation from "fragile" or "failing" to "stable". A detailed analysis of the basic aspects of Timor-Leste's insecurities as a constitutive element of its foreign policy becomes instrumental to understanding the country's nation-state-building experience since its separation from Indonesia in 1999, as it enters a new phase of socio-political structuring following the withdrawal of the international security presence in 2012.

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**Keywords:** Timor-Leste, foreign policy, constructivism, nation-state-building

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## Introduction

Timor-Leste,<sup>1</sup> one of the youngest members of the community of states, has entered a new stage of nation-state-building following the withdrawal of the United Nations presence in December 2012. It is possible to define nation-state-building as two separate but interrelated processes of political and social transformation that are shaped by the particular decisions and actions taken by national political leaderships, such as their choice of governance models, what development policies they adopt, and the way they formulate strategic approaches towards memberships in regional and global organisations. Nation-state-building, in other words, entails not only the pursuit of institutional and socio-economic development objectives but also the construction and consolidation of a sovereign state identity that is recognised and respected by other states. Viewed as such, the UN's withdrawal thirteen years after the territory's separation from Indonesia signifies a turning point in this process of socio-political structuring. It is equally worthwhile to note that Timorese leaders, as a result of a growing political experience and increasing wealth from oil and gas over the past few years, have indeed felt more confident in their capacity to lead the fledgling nation's path to socio-economic development as well as to secure its position in the regional and global order (Sahin 2012).

While the relationship between foreign and domestic politics is recognised in the burgeoning case-study literature on the Timorese nation-building process, the specific interconnections between the two have received little attention (for a discussion of Timor-Leste's foreign policy orientation, see, for example, Sukma 2001; Smith 2005). This paper attempts to bridge this analytical gap by drawing upon constructivist accounts of state action, which describe the foreign policy preferences of state officials as a continuous engagement with securing national identity. The paper locates the analysis of Timor-Leste's foreign policy-making in the broader context of Timorese decision-makers' quest to position their young state in the emerging global order based on their conceptions of "self" and "others". It argues that Timor-Leste's insecure state identity

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1 Depending on the time period of the events discussed in the paper, I use the terms "Timor-Leste" and "East Timor" to refer to the eastern half of the island of Timor along with the islands of Atauro, off the northern coast, and Jaco, to the northeast, which together constitute the territory of what is now officially known as the República Democrática de Timor-Leste. "East Timor" will be used when events preceding independence are addressed, "Timor-Leste" for the period following the formal achievement of independence in May 2002.

has determined the parameters of the political leadership's foreign policy moves. This identity can be examined by breaking it down into two parts: the construction of spatial boundaries and the creation of a temporal "other". The former refers to the Timorese state's political and cultural distinction from its neighbours. The latter relates to a wider process that encompasses the country's transition from a colony to an independent state under international supervision as well as its transformation from a "fragile" or "failing" state to a more stable one. These conceptions of identity have driven the Timorese political leadership's foreign policy decisions.

It should be noted, however, that this distinction is made for analytical rather than practical purposes, as there is some overlap between the two, as discussed later in the article. Examining the formation of conceptions of East Timorese identity by reference to domestic and external processes of interactive policy-making provides a useful analytical framework because policy-makers do not approach the international arena with a "blank slate" but with their own thoughts about the world and the place of their state in it (Weldes 1996). The point is to clarify "what is on that slate that decision-makers are bringing with them in their interaction with external Others" (Hopf 2002: 290).

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to explore the ideational foundations of Timor-Leste's foreign policy-making by way of analysing the writings and speeches of prominent state actors on particular foreign policy issues.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the paper examines in detail how the spatial and temporal dynamics of Timor-Leste's insecure identity have shaped the political leadership's foreign policy choices in the post-independence period. An in-depth analysis of the basic aspects of Timor-Leste's insecure identity as a constitutive element of its foreign policy is crucial to explaining the country's political transformation since its separation from Indonesia in 1999, as it enters a new phase of nation-state-building and its relations with its "traditional allies" and other external partners, particularly China, are closely scrutinised. As an important point to note in this regard, the use of the written or verbal statements of Timorese state officials as an analytical tool does not necessarily mean that the author takes these at face value. It rather serves to exemplify their "representational practices" (Campbell 1998; Weldes 1996) in relation to the

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2 Some of the key actors whose ideas and interpretations of the domestic and regional affairs have influenced the country's foreign policy agenda that is addressed in this paper include incumbent Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, former President José Ramos-Horta, current Minister of Justice Dionísio Babo Soares and Helder da Costa, the coordinator of the g7+Secretariat.

(re)construction of the East Timorese state identity, which, as the constructivist theory of international politics asserts, is an insecure entity in essence.

The paper begins with a brief conceptual overview of foreign policy-making as an instrument of securing state identity. A detailed analysis of the spatial aspects of the Timorese leadership's foreign policy choices is provided in the next section. The final part explores the temporal aspects of these preferences as a reflection of an insecure identity.

## Conceptualising Foreign Policy as a Practice of Securing Identity

Foreign policy analyses, informed by classical realism and neorealism, have largely focused on the ways in which states seek to satisfy their material interests, which are defined in terms of power. The former locates the origins of power politics in the self-interested nature of human behaviour (Morgenthau 1978). The latter explains the foreign policy decisions that states make in relation to the distribution of power in an anarchic world system that renders conflict an ever-present possibility (Waltz 1979). These analytical approaches take the properties of states as intrinsic and they rest on the rational actor model to predict or explain foreign policy practices of states as a set of fixed responses to specific security threats (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996).

However, when viewed from a constructivist perspective, states do not simply face threats and act on the basis of predetermined, objective factors such as the relative distribution of power in an anarchic environment. Rather, states are actively involved in the construction of their own national interests through processes of interpretation and representation (Weldes 1996). The distribution of power, Wendt (1992: 391–425) argues, may always affect state officials' calculations, but the way it does so depends on "intersubjective understandings" that shape their conceptions of self and other. States, therefore, "do not have a 'portfolio' of interests that they carry around independent of social context" (Wendt 1992: 398). It is rather the interactive processes of creating meaning or defining situations that determine their interests (Wendt 1992). These meanings are essentially those produced by state officials in relation to both international (Wendt 1999) and domestic historical and political contexts (Weldes 1996). Here, "interaction" is not simply the exchange of views or words by two actors, such as at an international meeting, but the relationship between the set of knowledge that each actor has of the other that determines the constitution of identity (Hopf 2002). Viewed

as such, foreign policy choices that state officials make to define certain issues as threats or as circumstances calling for a particular action can be best understood as “interpretive processes” that are shaped by interests, which in turn “depend on a particular construction of self-identity in relation to the conceived identity of others” (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996: 60). Identities, in other words, provide the basis for interests because actors “cannot decide what their interests are until they know what they are representing – ‘who they are’”, which is also constituted in and by processes of social relationships (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996: 60).

However, identities are “not fixed by nature” but “performatively” constituted through representational practices of differentiation that distinguish a “self” from an “other” (Campbell 1998). The construction of identities in relation to others performs “three necessary functions”: “It tells you and others who you are, tells you who others are, and implies a set of interests with respect to the choice of particular actions” (Hopf 1998: 175). The establishment of identity in relation to difference, however, potentially embodies a tension or “the paradox of difference” that complicates the constitutive relationship between self and other (Connolly 2002). This is not to suggest that differentiation of one group from another automatically results in strategies of otherness or violence, but the potential always exists due to the role of difference in the logic of identity as something both constituting and threatening its existence (Campbell 1998). Because of this paradox inherent to its capacity to exist as a state, the identity of the state is always an “insecure” (Connolly 2002) or “precarious” (Weldes 1999) entity that “needs constantly to be stabilized or (re)produced” (Weldes 1999: 59). In other words, the boundaries – which distinguish a “self” from an “other”, an “inside” from an “outside”, and “domestic” from “foreign” – need to be re-inscribed when distinction becomes “ambiguous” (Campbell 1998: 8, 69–72, 126).

Observed this way, foreign policy appears to be one of these boundary-creating practices that helps produce and reproduce the identity of the state in whose name it operates (Campbell 1998: 75). Because the conception of “what ‘we’ are” is closely linked to an understanding of “what ‘we’ fear” (Campbell 1998: 85), the operation of discourses of fear and danger becomes central to the process of securing identity, which demands its protection from a “spatial” (Campbell 1998: 69–70) or “temporal” (Wæver 1998) other. In this sense, foreign policy practices which impose boundaries and create meaning often construct an external realm that is inferior and threatening (Campbell 1998: 69–71). The externalisation of threats reinforces the distinction between an orderly

inside and a chaotic outside, which, as noted above, helps secure the state's existence. The location of threats in the outside realm also helps discipline the domestic realm by defining and representing resistant elements as "foreign" and linking them to threats located on the outside (Campbell 1998: 69–71). States' management of their day-to-day relations with each other, in other words, entails the characterisation of certain events or actors as "foreign" in order to secure their identity. The construction of the "foreign", however, is not restricted solely to subjective interpretations and linguistic practices of state officials but refers to an intersubjectively constituted process, as the construction of national interests involves the "interpellation" of individuals into the particular representations of world politics or their identification with a particular subject position or identity produced in and through these representations (Weldes 1996). It is important to note in this context that "identification" does not refer to the explicit or implicit approval of such representations by the masses, but, instead, denotes the emergence of a situation whereby the perception of particular power relations and interests is naturalised as "the way the world really is", while alternative understandings of events and courses of action are marginalised (Weldes 1996).

## The Definition of Timor-Leste's Regional Affiliations as a Practice of Spatial Boundary-Setting

Timor-Leste's path to independence began in June 1998, when the Habibie government proposed special autonomy status for East Timor. Later, in January 1999, the Indonesian president somewhat unexpectedly agreed to the conduct of a UN-sponsored popular consultation, which enabled the people of East Timor to choose between autonomy and full independence. The vote was held on 30 August 1999 and the majority of the registered electorate (78.5 per cent) opted for independence. However, the violence orchestrated by pro-autonomy militias following the announcement of the results by the UN led to the deaths of hundreds of people, a near-total destruction of the physical infrastructure and the displacement of almost two-thirds of the population. This wave of violence prompted the deployment of an Australian-led multinational force, the International Force in East Timor (INTERFET), to restore law and order, and the subsequent establishment of a large UN state-building mission, known as the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). The UN mission was vested with all sovereign

powers to prepare the territory for political independence and construct democratic state institutions. UNTAET handed over administrative authority to the elected Timorese government at a public ceremony on 20 May 2002, which was also attended by President Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia. The UN maintained its presence through a smaller support mission, which was mandated to provide interim law enforcement and assist with the operational readiness of the Timorese police service.

Timor-Leste's path to political independence, which followed centuries of foreign rule, also marked the beginning of another challenging process: nation-state-building. The building of the East Timorese nation-state entailed, among other things, improving the effectiveness of its newly created state institutions and consolidating its political identity (Sahin 2011). After all, the capacity of states to maintain their existence as a cohesive territorial entity, as Campbell rightly points out, becomes possible "only by virtue of their ability to constitute themselves as imagined communities" (Campbell 1998: 195). In the case of Timor-Leste, the resolution of two important issues occupied a central place in the production of the boundaries of the identity of the newly established state: One was the choice of the country's main languages, which became a divisive topic as the promotion of Portuguese alienated the country's youth, who felt excluded from the post-independence nation-state-building process dominated by Timorese leaders of older generations (Nurbaiti 2001). The re-institution of the former coloniser's language as one of the two official languages of the state more than two decades after Portugal's departure was a political decision (Sahin 2011). It was influenced by both material and non-material factors. The adoption of Portuguese advantaged a historically privileged class and provided the Timorese government with access to European Union funds for national development through Portugal (Sahin 2011).

It was also a way for the older-generation Timorese leaders, whose political authority was challenged by Indonesian-educated younger Timorese in the post-Indonesian period, to "discipline the inside". They managed to contain the internal opposition to Portuguese by arguing that it was an "integral" component of East Timorese national identity, while emphasising the foreignness of Indonesian. This belief is reflected in Xanana Gusmão's rationalisation of the choice of Portuguese. According to Gusmão, former guerrilla leader and now Prime Minister, his country owed its independence to Portugal: "If the Portuguese [had] left many years ago", the Timorese leader argued, "the Dutch would have taken this area and we would have become Indonesia. We have them to thank for our own identity" (quoted in Greenlees and Garran 2002: 312).



The choice of Portuguese and development of “privileged ties” with Portuguese-speaking countries were incorporated into the Constitution adopted in March 2002. Thus, the adoption of Portuguese served to produce the boundaries of the identity of the state as Portuguese symbolises Timor-Leste’s political independence and cultural difference from its two powerful neighbours, Indonesia and Australia. The description of the newly born state’s identity in terms of an inherited Portuguese identity, in other words, has been instrumental to the production of the state’s political and cultural boundaries, providing the basis for its interests. For reasons outlined above, it was promoted to the population in Timor-Leste as being in the interests of the newly independent nation.

The other key component of Timor-Leste’s identity formation was related to the resolution of a “regional dilemma” that was also rooted in a historical context (Babo-Soares and da Costa 2003). José Ramos-Horta, who would later become the first Foreign Minister of the East Timorese state, describes the historical and cultural origins of this dilemma as follows in 1996, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize:

East Timor is at the crossroads of three major cultures: Melanesian, which binds us to our brothers and sisters of the South Pacific region; Malay-Polynesian, binding us to Southeast Asia; and the Latin Catholic influence, a legacy of almost 500 years of Portuguese colonization (*Nobelprize.org* 1996).

Throughout the Indonesian occupation, the nationalist political leadership organised in the diaspora promoted closer ties with Melanesian states, which strongly supported Timor-Leste’s struggle for independence in the international arena. For instance, Ramos-Horta stated in March 1999 that East Timorese had “more in common culturally and historically with the South Pacific than with Indonesia and the rest of Southeast Asia” (*Pasifika Nius* 1999). After independence, however, Timorese politicians chose to assert the newly born state’s identity as a Southeast Asian nation by joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Regarding that choice, Ramos-Horta, who had assumed the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in the transitional cabinet formed by UNTAET, remarked in an interview in 2001,

Ideally, we’d prefer membership in both ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum. However, ASEAN rules do not permit such double membership. We are taking one step at a time, developing bilateral relations with as many ASEAN countries as possible, paving the way for a future application for full membership (*Asia pacificms.com* 2001).

While it might be possible to trace the origins of Timorese policy-makers' policy of positioning their state in Southeast Asia back to 1975,<sup>3</sup> it is important to note that Ramos-Horta's statement followed the comments of an Indonesian diplomat, who argued that Timor-Leste "cannot be accepted as a member of ASEAN if it also wants to be a member of the South Pacific Forum" (*Timor Post* 2001). Babo-Soares and da Costa (2003) explain the leadership's shifting position as fitting a "logic" of policy and economic interest by gaining access to an influential regional grouping, broadening the newly created state's regional ties beyond Indonesia and connecting it commercially to strong economies. According to Ramos-Horta, though, joining the bloc would be important for Timor-Leste's future "not so much as an economic umbrella [...] but as a means to attain security" (Ramos-Horta 2001: 8).

Ramos-Horta's description of ASEAN membership as a security project exemplifies the constructivist views of identities as being the basis of interests. By choosing ASEAN rather than the Pacific Island Forum – made up of small island states and dominated by Australia and New Zealand – Timorese decision-makers indicated their interest in becoming a part of a bigger and seemingly more flexible and stable regional grouping. Ramos-Horta's remarks also illustrate how foreign policy decisions are made through intersubjectively constituted processes – that is, state officials do not have a predetermined "portfolio" of interests; rather, their calculations are shaped by "intersubjective understandings" of "self" and "other" (Wendt 1999) that are rooted in historical contexts (Weldes 1996). The realisation of the "self", as noted earlier, is closely linked to an understanding of "what 'we' fear" (Campbell 1998). In the case of Timor-Leste, which finally became independent in 2002 following four centuries of Portuguese colonial administration, 24 years of Indonesian occupation and two-and-a-half years of UN transitional rule, foreign interference constitutes a particular source of fear. Timorese politicians' choice of Southeast Asia, in other words, relates to their search for the identity of the new state *vis-à-vis* its two powerful neigh-

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3 In a press statement issued on 16 September 1975, FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste) recognises ASEAN as "a factor of stability and a driving force of regional cooperation. East Timor would greatly benefit from integration into ASEAN after independence." However, Cold War politics diminished the left-wing party's efforts to prevent the Indonesian occupation and led to the eventual exclusion of the former Portuguese colony as a "legitimate political actor" from the agenda of ASEAN, which had already declared its own "anti-communist character". For further details, see Ortuoste (2011).

bours. By expressing their willingness to cooperate with Indonesia in a regional organisation that promotes the norms of non-intervention and prevention of great power rivalry in the region, Timorese policy-makers sought to assure Jakarta that Timor-Leste would not become a “Trojan horse” for an external power (Smith 2005). This assurance became particularly important considering one of the arguments Indonesia had put forward in the past to justify its annexation of East Timor: to prevent the former Portuguese colony from becoming an unviable state vulnerable to intervention by bigger states (Smith 2005; see also Anderson 1995).

In March 2011, with a view to finalising the country’s almost decade-long ASEAN bid, whose significance goes beyond economic benefits to the realm of identity formation, the Timorese government officially applied to become the eleventh member of the regional bloc “as soon as possible”. Despite Jakarta’s strong backing, the required consensus among member states could not be achieved – reportedly due to Singapore’s objection to the admission of as poor and still institutionally weak state as Timor-Leste – while ASEAN’s economic integration process is still underway (Wain 2011). According to some observers, China’s growing ties with its former province underlie Jakarta’s “unconditional” support for Timorese accession, even though the Indonesian government rejects the parallels established between the cases of Timor-Leste and Myanmar (Chongkittavorn 2011).

However, it should be noted that Myanmar’s admission to the regional grouping in 1997 on a fast-track basis was a political decision intended to marginalise the Chinese presence in Southeast Asia. Political developments since then indicate the contrary, though. Indeed, through its soft-power diplomacy based on a no-strings-attached approach, Beijing has come to be viewed by the regional states, including Timor-Leste, as an alternative source of development aid. In addition to the provision of training and scholarships for East Timorese students and civil servants, China has provided funding for the construction of a new presidential palace, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and defence buildings and military residential quarters in Dili. China also sold two patrol boats to Timor-Leste in 2010.

These developments, particularly the purchase of the boats, were also closely watched by Australia. Dili’s rejection of Canberra’s offer for Timor-Leste to join the Australian Pacific Patrol Boat Program in favour of purchasing the two Shanghai-class vessels, including their operation by Chinese sailors until the Timorese crews were trained, raised questions in the Australian media as to whether their neighbour was shifting its strategic orientation (see, for example, Toohey 2010). Writing on the

matter in a report released by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in April 2011, Dionisio Babo-Soares (2011: 295), secretary-general of Xanana Gusmão's CNRT (National Congress for the Reconstruction of Timor-Leste) party, emphasised that the government's purchase of the boats and receipt of Chinese aid "doesn't mean that Timor-Leste is leaving its traditional allies".

When looked at from the perspective of the constructivist theory of state action, it becomes abundantly clear that the Gusmão government's move to increase bilateral cooperation with China reflects Timorese leaders' growing confidence and political experience in manoeuvring between competing state actors to secure the identity of their fledgling state as the basis of national interest. First, it should be noted that the Timorese government's foreign policy move followed a serious dispute with the Australian-based oil company Woodside, which is in favour of building a floating platform in the Timor Sea to process gas in the Greater Sunrise fields. Timorese leaders, however, have insisted on the construction of an onshore pipeline with a view to linking the gas reserves to the country's pressing energy and socio-economic needs, including the creation of employment opportunities for the youth. Second, Indonesian and Australian concerns over China's increasing regional influence are not unknown to Timorese state officials. The Rudd government's 2009 *Defence White Paper*, for instance, states that

the pace, scope and structure of China's military modernisation have the potential to give its neighbours cause for concern if not carefully explained, and if China does not reach out to others to build confidence regarding its military plans (Australia's Department of Defence 2009).

By increasing Dili's ties with Beijing, the Timorese government, as one foreign observer rightly points out, seeks to demonstrate they have other options "when it comes to defence partners" (quoted in Murdoch 2011) and when it comes to the availability of overseas development resources. In so doing, Timorese leaders seek to improve their country's competitive position in their dealings with Jakarta and Canberra, which both declared their full support for Dili's entry into ASEAN.

Timor-Leste's relations with China, in other words, are linked to both material and ideational considerations. On one hand, Timorese leaders are trying to avoid being heavily dependent on their country's two powerful neighbours. On the other hand, their development of closer relations with China is driven by a desire to consolidate an "independent" state identity. These material and non-material factors are linked to each other. Dili's ties with Beijing not only affect boundary-

setting aspects of Timor-Leste's identity, but also are closely related to their need for a temporal other. As will be discussed in the following section, Timor-Leste's identity is "performatively" constituted in relation to the "fragile" or "failing" state status and the importance of the "inter-subjective understandings" of that status: As Timorese officials seek to define their country's spatial boundaries and independent identity by promoting closer relations with China, other countries such as Australia and Indonesia are concerned with Beijing's expanding influence over the South Pacific region. Furthermore, these countries may view Timor-Leste's externally perceived status as a "fragile" state as particularly problematic. Clearly, Timor-Leste needs to secure more aid for its socio-economic development. To that end, it is trying to access resources being offered by China to developing states unconditionally. Thus, Australia and Indonesia are likely to prefer a Timorese state that becomes more stable in the sense of Weberian statehood and aligns itself with ASEAN rather than with China.

## The "Failed State" Image as Timor-Leste's Temporal Other

Timor-Leste was largely viewed as a poster child for internationally assisted democratic state-building until the outbreak of a security crisis in 2006 (Sahin 2007). The eruption of violent riots in the streets of Dili, including deadly clashes between the military and the police in May 2006 exposed how deeply political rivalries and social tensions permeated the institutional aspects of the nation-building process. The riots cost the lives of at least 37 people and led to the displacement of approximately 150,000 people in the capital (United Nations 2006a). The UN responded to the crisis by deploying its fifth mission since 1999, which was mandated to provide public safety, to "assist" the Timorese government in promoting national recovery and to conduct a comprehensive review of the needs and responsibilities of the security sector (United Nations 2006b). The 2006 crisis changed the country's image from one of a successfully developing state to a "failed state". For instance, since 2007 it has been listed among the most vulnerable states in Failed States Index put out by *Foreign Policy* and the Fund for Peace (Fund for Peace 2013). Former President Ramos-Horta's statement before the UN Security Council in February 2007 illustrates the political leadership's disappointment by the ambivalent treatment of the identity of the Timorese state by the international community:

Some in the past have been overly optimistic, but that can lead people to lose perspective, to lose sight of reality and turn pessimistic at the first sight of trouble. One day they label East Timor a success story, the next day they call it a failure (United Nations 2007).

It is here that a brief discussion of “failed state” status as a discourse and act of boundary-setting becomes instrumental to understand Timorese politicians’ foreign policy discourses. The concept of “failed state” originated in the early 1990s. Helman and Ratner were among the first to use the concept in the context of the breakdown of central authority structures and the eruption of violence in countries like Somalia and former Yugoslav and Soviet republics following the fall of socialist regimes (Helman and Ratner 1992). While it was treated as a regional security and humanitarian problem during that period, the “state failure” issue became a central concern for Western policy-makers following the attacks of 11 September 2001. The expanding policy and academic literature is characterised by an abundance of terms used to describe the phenomenon, but it is informed by an analytical methodology that seeks to measure the institutional and functional capacities of states. Although the term “fragile” states is now widely used by the World Bank and bilateral development agencies such as the UK’s Department for International Development, the phenomenon is still analysed in terms of a continuum of “stateness”, along which the world’s states are ranked according to their performance in meeting the Weberian criteria for statehood (Milliken and Krause 2002; Bilgin and Morton 2004). Due to their limited institutional ability to exercise territorial control and provide for the needs of their citizens, these states are also associated with a series of global security challenges, such as human trafficking, pandemics, criminal networks and terrorism (Fukuyama 2004). It is therefore argued on an international level that it is too risky to leave these states to their own devices, and that these states should instead be responded to with capacity-building interventions. The ability or willingness of the political leaderships of these “failed” states to engage in international capacity-building frameworks determines the type of intervention, ranging from forced regime change and peacekeeping to the establishment of UN trusteeships and the insertion of foreign advisory staff into key state institutions (Torres and Anderson 2004; Francois and Sud 2006).

One of the main criticisms of the “failed state” paradigm is the presentation of some states’ experience as a “deviation” from the “ideal”, which is constructed by reference to the performance of those states viewed as approximating it most (Bilgin and Morton 2004; Hameiri

2007). This approach, according to Wilde, helps reinforce Western ideas of a “successful” self constituted in relation to a “failed” other, resonating Edward Said’s conceptualisation of Orientalism “as a way of understanding how Western culture conceives itself through an alienated, oriental ‘other’” (Wilde 2004: 91). Another often criticised aspect of the “state failure” paradigm is its disregard for the underlying historical context out of which different forms of state organisation have come into existence in different parts of the world (Milliken and Krause 2002; Bilgin and Morton 2004). In addition, much has been written on how “failed state” status has been exploited to operationalise military intervention against certain regimes (Boas and Jennings 2007: 475–485). However, the question of how those states – labelled as “fragile”, “failing” or “failed” – have responded to this paradigm has received little analytical attention. Even the most ardent critics of the mainstream literature (such as Chandler 2006) have tended to treat these states as passive receivers of the discourse and confined their analyses to the ways in which Western powers have constructed the identity of some non-Western societies as “failed states” and rationalised their intrusive policy interventions.

However, following Wendt’s (1992) conceptualisation of actors’ construction of identities as an outcome of intersubjectively constituted processes rather than a one-way relationship, it can be argued that the leaderships of those countries framed as “fragile” or “failed states” may resist such representations even within the terms of the dominant discourse. Resistance by local elites, as Bhabha (1994) points out in his analysis of colonial discourses, can take shape through adopting or adapting the concepts and practices that powerful external agencies construct on the basis of difference. Through “mimicking” the language of the dominant actors in the international arena, local elites struggle against hegemonic structures and ideologies because “mimicry”, Bhabha suggests, reflects “the desire for a reformed, recognizable ‘Other’, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994: 122).

When this analytical approach is applied to Timor-Leste, where the UN and other international agencies were heavily involved in the creation of democratic state capacities, it appears that the “failed state” concept has become the basis for a temporal other, against which the identity of the Timorese state has been “performatively” constituted. The “failed state” discourse, as discussed earlier, produces a “paradox of difference” as it presents the differences in the governance capacity of states as a global security problem and makes them appear an aberration



from the norm. Moreover, the willingness of their leaderships to enter into partnerships for the purpose of capacity development determines the course of international action to address the security implications of “state failure”. In this regard, the possibility of the use of foreign military or political power creates enormous pressure for many developing states. On the other hand, international actors’ favouring of “good performers” (Harrison 2001; Harrison and Mulley 2007) or “good enough performers” (Grindle 2004; DFID 2005) in strengthening state capacity provides opportunities to the state with regard to the availability of development assistance. In an attempt to access aid and avoid direct or indirect forms of intervention and regulation, the leaders of developing states are often likely to adopt or express their commitment to the forms and values of governance structures promoted by international agencies.

This is exemplified by Timorese politicians’ verbal references to some of the key elements of the contemporary development discourse in an attempt to distinguish the identity of their state, a state that is committed to democratic ideals and willing to share its development experience with other countries. For instance, the strengthening of liberal democratic principles is described in the above-mentioned ASPI report as being within the “core national interest” of the Timorese state (Babo-Soares 2011: 21). Prime Minister Gusmão’s speech before the British donor community in London in March 2011 is another case in point to demonstrate the centrality of internationally advocated concepts (for instance, the security–development nexus, lesson-learning and eradicating the root causes of conflict) to the government’s development discourse:

From these crises [in 2006 and 2008] we learnt that the path to development is difficult [...]. And most importantly, we learnt that we needed to directly address the root causes of our fragility [...]. We began by focusing our effort on securing peace and stability – for there can be no development without security. We worked to heal wounds, to change mentalities and to address deep social problems [...]. Timor-Leste has been fortunate to have the support of generous development partners [...]. We now want to do what we can to make a contribution to other nations of the world in this same spirit of solidarity and friendship (Gusmão 2011a).

One of the clearest manifestations of this approach is the government’s co-sponsorship of the “g7+” initiative. As made clear on the group’s website as well as in the documents the members have produced, representatives of its member states use the language of the donor



community in such a way that illustrates their “desire for a reformed, recognizable ‘Other’, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite”, following Bhabha. For instance, the “g7+” homepage starts with one of the most widely cited accounts of global poverty in international policy guidelines, those produced by the World Bank and the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD: “Of the 7 billion people in the world, 1.5 billion live in situations of conflict and fragility” (*g7plus.org* 2013). It then describes the group as a “voluntary association” of “fragile” and “conflict-affected” states seeking to “stop conflict, build nations and eradicate poverty through innovative development strategies” (*g7plus.org* 2013). Timorese leaders’ “desire for a reformed, recognizable ‘Other’” is also alluded to in the group’s objectives, which can be summarised thusly: to provide a forum through which to achieve the reform of both the current aid system and international engagement by considering fragility from the perspective of the developing rather than the developed (*g7plus.org* 2013).

Another reflection of the “performative” function of the “failed state” paradigm in the context of Timorese politics is the rise of a political discourse that is marked by a predisposition to treat any implication of misconduct or criticism of the political leadership’s policies and practices, particularly in the field of the rule of law, as a product of a biased approach and inaccurate knowledge. In January 2011, for instance, the government rejected a draft of the UNDP’s *Human Development Report*, which criticised the political leadership for failing to effectively address youth unemployment and impunity (Murdoch 2011). Timorese leaders questioned the authors’ motives and rejected the report on the grounds that it was politically biased and contained information that was not referenced. The report was rewritten and finally released in early May that year. However, the coverage of an internal UN presentation by the media shortly afterwards set off another political row.<sup>4</sup> The leaked document, citing some of Gusmão’s past actions (such as the creation of special funds in the 2011 budget and the release of a former militia member upon his verbal order in 2009), contained an opinion that the Prime Minister might consolidate power at the expense of the parliament and the judiciary. It was described by Ramos-Horta, president at the time, as an example of “pseudo-analysis” by UN bureaucrats who “do not speak the local language and hardly ever mingle with East Timorese” (*Tempo Semanal* 2011).

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4 The leaked document, entitled *For Sustainable Democratic Governance in Timor-Leste, Retreat on 24 January 2011*, is accessible via <<http://temposemanaltimor.blogspot.com/2011/05/exklusif-internal-un-document-says.html>> (22 May 2011).

Rather than utilising diplomatic avenues to address the issue, Gusmão brought the said UN document to public attention during a speech he held on 17 May 2011, whose main themes were state-building and nation-building (Gusmão 2011b). The Prime Minister stated that he was described in an internal UN document as “a big obstacle to the development of democracy in Timor-Leste”. Like Ramos-Horta had done, Gusmão questioned the knowledge and motives of the staff of UNMIT (the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste) and accused them of wishing to see Timor-Leste in a prolonged crisis so that they could stay longer in the country instead of moving on to dangerous environments. Gusmão advised the UN mission’s international and local staff to pack up and “offer [their] services to improve Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and give support to democracy in Yemen, Syria and Libya”.

It is important to note that this was not the first time that the Timorese leader openly levelled his criticisms against the UN and other members of the international community. A brief overview of the speeches he delivered as well as the online postings by Secretary of State for Defence Julio Tomas Pinto since 2009 evinces the rise of a sovereignty-focused discourse among Timorese (see, for example, Gusmão 2010, 2011; *Tempo Semanal* 2010; Pinto 2009, 2011). Gusmão’s above rhetoric illustrates how the meaning and social effects of national interests and crises are constructed in official state discourses (Weldes 1996, 1999) as well as demonstrating the relevance of these constructs to the consolidation of state power and a (re)generation of a sense of “imagined community” (Anderson 1991).

First, by reacting in such a way as described above to the opinion that he, himself, was “a big obstacle to the development of democracy in Timor-Leste”, Gusmão marginalises alternative accounts and their content, which include references to the executive’s interference in the judiciary and his weakening of oversight mechanisms. Second, the Prime Minister links resistant or dissident elements of his actions and policies in the domestic realm to the outside. This is apparent in his statement that “UNMIT also mentioned the Maternus Bere [militia leader released in 2009] case. Some Timorese also shouted, because people from other countries told them to shout.” Third, by way of invoking sovereign sensitivities, the Timorese leader not only distinguishes the identity of the state as a successfully functioning democracy but also disciplines the inside. This is exemplified by his defining “good” citizens as not simply those in possession of state ID cards or those who vote in elections, but those who “defend Timor-Leste’s sovereignty”. His emphasis on this

aspect of citizenship is also highlighted in his advice to the Timorese who worked for UNMIT:

You do not need to show off; you do not need to grovel for other people's money, because this is a sickness, which we call mental colonialism or intellectual colonialism [...]. In our Constitution it says: Do not alienate our sovereignty, do not sell our sovereignty to other people (Gusmão 2011b).

Fourth, to paraphrase Weldes, Gusmão creates a particular identity or subject position of the Timorese state within specific power relations and “interpellates” the audience into this identity. As the Prime Minister declares at the end of his speech, “We know what we want, and the state of Timor-Leste knows what its people want.” In his usage of “we”, “Timor-Leste” becomes the identity of his “self” and of those listening, generating a broader sense of belonging around the identity of the state reasserted:

The state cannot give value to the undeserved opinions of one or two individuals. The state needs to remain firm, follow the road that it knows to be correct and good for the people [...]. During the war, we had one principle: “Rely on your own strength”, meaning “Rely on your own capacity.” We kept in our mind another principle – “national unity through reconciliation”, meaning, we only build unity when we make peace and live in peace (Gusmão 2011b).

On a final note, the context in which Gusmão levelled his criticisms is of particular importance. By delivering a fiery speech at a conference attended by foreign diplomats and UN staff, the Timorese politician targeted a specific audience and sought to send a specific message. His message conveyed not only the political leadership's growing discomfort with the continued presence of the UN and other international capacity-development agencies since 1999, but also its confidence in its own ability to take full control of the country's governmental and institutional affairs, in recognition of Timor-Leste's identity as a sovereign state.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate the connections between Timor-Leste's insecure identity and its leaders' foreign policy preferences in the post-independence period. Using a constructivist theoretical framework and relevant empirical material derived from the speeches and writings of Timorese state officials as a collection of “representa-

tional practices", I sought to clarify what is on their "slate" during their external interactions in the context of nation-state-building. After all, the specific foreign policy decisions that state officials take as part of their effort to shape and consolidate the political and cultural character of their state and its place in the emerging global order do not occur in an ideational vacuum, nor are they simply shaped by a set of supposedly objective rules and behaviours conditioned by the strategic environment where they are operating. Rather, their preferences are the products of "intersubjective meanings" of "self" and "other" residing in both international and domestic social and political processes.

Understood as such, it becomes clear that Timorese policy-makers' choice of Southeast Asia as the strategic orientation of the fledgling state was neither the "only choice" available nor merely a matter of material considerations. Instead, they view ASEAN membership as providing an important opportunity to establish and secure the boundaries of state identity, which is essentially a "precarious" entity. Although strategically positioning Timor-Leste in Southeast Asia, the government has also sought to distinguish the sovereign identity of the state from its two powerful neighbours, Australia and Indonesia, by referencing its Portuguese heritage.

These spatial aspects of identity creation and consolidation are also intermingled with the temporal aspects of the nation-building process; along the same vein, the temporal dimensions of the process have been influenced by the country's historical experiences. This situation is mirrored in the rise of a sovereignty-focused political discourse that emphasises the fledgling nation's capacity to govern itself and function as a developmental state. This discourse which demonstrates the leadership's growing confidence is closely related to the country's transitional experience from a former colony and internationally supervised "fragile" polity to a more stable country. It is, in other words, embedded in a process of identity construction that is underpinned by the understandings and meanings Timorese officials have attributed to the emerging global order and Timor-Leste's place therein.

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